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# Brexit and British diversity

There were three Brexits:

- The Reformation which cut the links between Great Britain and the Church of Rome when King Henry VIII wanted to divorce Catherine of Aragon to marry Anne Boleyn. As the Pope refused to annul his first marriage, King Henry VIII became the Supreme Leader of the Church of England and severed the links with Rome. That was the first Brexit.
- The second Brexit was in 1940 which was a military defeat as well as an economic defeat for the UK. It had its supplies cut off. The UK came to depend on its Empire. 1940 was a moment of catastrophic defeat which gave power to the United States. It was a disaster for Britain and Europe. Britain was supported by the United States and it was the beginning of the Special Relationship. A large part of the British elite were not happy with the position they were forced into.
- The third Brexit which was triggered by the referendum on British membership of the EU took place on 23 June 2016.

51.9% of the British people voted for Brexit, while 48% of British people voted for Remain.

The Scots, the Northern Irish and London voted for Remain, while England and Wales voted for Brexit. Anti-immigration sentiment was one of the main cause leading to the Leave vote. Leavers thought that the UK was becoming too accommodating. Britain's decision to Leave the EU on 23 June 2016 sent shockwaves across global markets and triggered a political crisis in Britain. It was a vote to retrieve sovereignty and start a new chapter in British history.

Many of those who voted for Brexit felt that they had been ignored and were angry at the political and economic establishment. The referendum offered an opportunity to display that anger.

The referendum showed a country deeply divided along mutually reinforcing cleavages around identity, age, geography, culture, and education. In Scotland there was a 62% vote to remain in the EU and in Northern Ireland there was a 55.8% vote to remain in the EU. 69% of young adults supported Remain compared with 31% for Leave. A generation of pro-European voters feel betrayed by Brexit. Great Britain remains deeply divided along these fault lines five years after the referendum. Indeed, Brexit identity has become far stronger than party identity; for while survey evidence shows that 21 percent have no party identity, only 6 percent have no Brexit identity.

On 31 January 2020, the UK officially left the EU and remained in the customs union and the single market during a transition period until 31 December 2020. The UK and the EU managed to agree on a trade deal at the last minute on 24 December 2020. Is Brexit a demonstration of a disunited kingdom? Is Britain divided? The four nations have been united gradually. Wales merged with England in 1536. The English takeover of Scotland goes back to the Act of the Union in 1707. Ireland became part of Great Britain in 1801. The construction of the Union goes back a long way: 1536, 1707, 1801. Yet the Union has never been weaker and the major cause is Brexit.

## I. The Meaning of the Brexit referendum

The referendum could be seen as an act of rebellion: it was a protest about immigration, globalisation and liberalism. It was also a victory for working-class power. Around 37 percent of Labour voters, who would normally have followed the advice of their party, did not do so but voted to leave the European Union – though an even larger number of Conservative voters – around 58 percent – refused to follow the advice of *their* party leader and supported Brexit. But the referendum saw the largest turnout\* – 72%, the highest since the 1992 general election – and the support of working-class voters which helped to swing the balance\* in favour of Brexit. Half of Brexiteers were well off and had no expectations of huge economic gains but thought leaving the EU would help take back control. The high turnout in the referendum was a striking illustration of democratic commitment on the part of the least fortunate in British society.

Turnout was highest in those areas which voted for Brexit, while the lowest turnouts were amongst Remain voters. Of the four regions with the lowest turnouts, three were Remain areas – Northern Ireland, which had the lowest turnout of all; Scotland, with the second lowest turnout; and

London – although, ironically, it was voters in these areas who were most insistent in demanding a second referendum, once the outcome was known.

The 2016 referendum was in fact a repudiation not only of the Cameron government but of the political class as a whole. All three major political parties favoured remaining, as did the nationalist parties in the non-English parts of the United Kingdom.

Only 156 Members of Parliament out of 650 campaigned for a Leave vote in the 2016 referendum, but 401 of the 650 constituencies supported it. The majority in Theresa May's Cabinet had also been Remainers, as were the vast majority of members of the House of Lords. The sovereignty of Parliament was now to be constrained – not legally, but for all practical purposes – not by Brussels but by the people.

What were Leavers expecting from Brexit? Brexit was an opportunity to do things differently. There was a set of aspirations for the future. There were high hopes and there was an optimistic nostalgia to take back control and recover sovereignty. Voting for Brexit was a vote for change and it was a vote to go back to a time when Britain was better. They wanted to restore national pride in Britain.

## II. The consequences of the Brexit referendum

The consequences of Brexit are seismic. It is the greatest constitutional reform since 1660.

Brexit means leaving the EU, implies taking back control of borders, laws and taxpayers' money. Yet Brexit has unleashed populist attacks on institutions Parliament, the courts, the BBC and the civil service.

The European Union is a free association of 27 states, which explicitly recognises in Article 50 of the Lisbon treaty (2008) the right of secession, a right Britain has taken advantage of.

Theresa May triggered\* article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty on 29 March 2017 but Theresa May's deal never got to a majority in Parliament. The UK did not leave the EU on 29 March 2019 and asked for an extension until 12 April and then until 31 October 2019.

Theresa May had to resign from the leadership of the Conservative party on 24 May 2019 and there was a leadership election. Boris Johnson won and

became Prime Minister in July 2019. He renegotiated the Withdrawal Bill in Brussels and got a deal on Thursday 17 October 2019.

Boris Johnson organised a general election on 12 December 2019. The Conservatives won an 80 seat majority in the House of Commons which strengthened the Prime Minister.

On 31 January 2020, the UK officially left the EU and remained in the customs union and the single market during a transition period until 31 December 2020. The UK has removed from EU rules. On 24 December 2020, the UK and the EU agreed on a trade deal which was approved by the EU Parliament on 27 April 2021 by 660 votes. There were 332 abstentions and five MEPs opposed the trade agreement.

Most soft Brexit models fell off the table\*. The soft Brexit concept failed.

In a recent poll, the British were asked what was the biggest political headache for the government.

- United Labour party: 2%.
- SNP majority: 9%.
- Unemployment: 20%.
- Brexit: 69%.

The politics of the next few years will be dominated by the economic consequences of Brexit. We are now living through a full-scale economic crisis which is due to Covid-19. There is a differed employment shock with the furlough\* scheme implemented by the Johnson government. In April 2021, there were 4.9% of unemployed people in the UK.

### **III. Brexit and its aftermath\***

The EU considers Brexit as a historic mistake and wants to deter other countries from leaving the club. The EU is used to setting rules and wants to protect its businesses.

There was a summit in Brussels on 23 September 2020. There was an EU Summit on 25 September 2020 to focus on Brexit. The 9<sup>th</sup> round of negotiations started on 28 September 2020.

A row\* over the Internal Market Bill ensued. The aim of the Internal Market Bill 2020 is to protect the sovereignty of the UK, to provide certainty for business and to preserve the UK's commitment to the people of Northern Ireland. On 14 September 2020, 340 MPs voted for the Internal Market Bill

and 263 against. Is it Boris Johnson's tactic to put pressure on the EU? The UK was the country which stood for international law. The Internal Market Bill undercuts that. It has an implication for the British foreign policy.

A week before the end of the transition period, a trade deal between the United Kingdom and the European Union was finally reached on Christmas Eve 2020, four years and a half after the referendum of 23 June 2016 on the British membership of the European Union. The trade deal came as a relief after fears of leaving without a deal. It is a historic deal and the biggest bilateral trade agreement between the European Union and a third country. There will be no tariffs or quotas on the trading of goods between the United Kingdom and the European Union but there will be customs checks\* at the border. It will also pave the way to new free trade agreements. Prime Minister Boris Johnson had promised that the United Kingdom would no longer have to abide by EU regulations on 1 January 2021 and this deal has enabled the United Kingdom to take back control of its borders, its laws and its waters. As the British Prime Minister declared on Christmas Day 2020: "We have taken back control of our laws and our destiny. We have taken back control of every jot\* and tittle of our regulation in a way that is complete and unfettered.\*" It is a major success for Prime Minister Boris Johnson who was committed to delivering Brexit and won an 80 seat majority in the general election of 12 December 2019 on that platform.

## Conclusion

Brexit is a major turning point. Brexit revealed that Britain was already much more divided than it realised. It has polarised British society. Leave voters say there are no negatives to Brexit and Remainers say there are no positives to Brexit. The most negative effects of Brexit are loss of mobility and damage to the Union. Five years on, British people have not moved an inch and there are two binary camps.

Britain is gambling\* its future as a United Kingdom and a member of the EU on the results of two referendums and with support for Scottish independence at 46%, the kingdom may yet break up.

The problem is Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. This could have an impact on the fragile peace and the potential trade deal with the United States, as the Biden camp made it clear.

Brexit is likely to strengthen the forces of globalisation, instead of weakening them. Economic success outside the European Union requires

Britain to become more competitive by opening up markets and embracing free trade. It means encouraging enterprise by lowering corporation tax and perhaps personal taxation as well. Since then the global pandemic has led to the increasing role of the State in the British economy with the furlough scheme. Paradoxically the very government which finally took Britain out of the European Union will be the one that propelled the country in the direction of European social democracy. Will public spending continue to rise as long as the pandemic spreads in order to compensate for the loss of income and to avoid a major economic crisis?

Nevertheless, the process of Brexit has not shaken the foundations of the British political system. Whatever the final outcome is, Britain will remain a stable democracy, one of the most stable in the world; and its constitutional and political structures will retain their solidity. Brexit will make of Britain a global player and Britain will design its own policy.

 **Interview on the trade agreement between the UK and the EU on 24 December 2020**

<https://www.france24.com/fr/vid%C3%A9o/20201229-accord-sur-l-apr%C3%A8s-brexit-un-accord-vaut-mieux-qu-un-brexit-sans-accord?ref=fb>

 **Interview on 30 December 2020 in Good Morning Business to comment the trade agreement between the UK and the EU**

[https://www.bfmtv.com/economie/replay-emissions/good-morning-business/sophie-loussouarn-constitution-britannique-debat-sur-l-accord-post-brexit-aujourd-hui-30-12\\_VN-202012300035.html](https://www.bfmtv.com/economie/replay-emissions/good-morning-business/sophie-loussouarn-constitution-britannique-debat-sur-l-accord-post-brexit-aujourd-hui-30-12_VN-202012300035.html)

## Vocabulary

Turnout	participation
To swing the balance	faire pencher la balance
To prevail over	l'emporter sur
To trigger	déclencher
To fall off	tomber à l'eau
Furlough scheme	dispositif d'indemnisation du chômage
Aftermath	conséquences
To impinge	empiéter

Row	dispute
Unfettered	sans entraves
Jot and tittle	note et titre
To gamble	jouer

### From United Kingdom to Untied<sup>1</sup> Kingdom

The bonds that hold England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland together are weaker than at any time in living memory

*The Economist*, 15 April 2021

The United Kingdom was not born in glory. The English conquest of Ireland in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was brutal, motivated by fear of invasion and facilitated by the superiority of Cromwell's army. The English takeover of Scotland in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was more pragmatic, born out of Scottish bankruptcy after an ill-fated American investment and English worries about France. But the resulting union was more than the sum of its parts: it gave birth to an intellectual and scientific revolution, centred on Edinburgh as well as London; an industrial revolution which grew out of that, enriching Glasgow as well as Manchester and Liverpool; an empire built as much by Scots as Englishmen; and a military power which helped save the world from fascism. That union is now weaker than at any point in living memory. The causes are many, but Brexit is the most important. Political leaders in London, Edinburgh and Belfast have put their country at risk by the way they have managed Britain's departure from the European Union.

Boris Johnson, the prime minister, has done it carelessly, by putting party above country and espousing a hard Brexit. The Scots never wanted to leave the EU and are inclined to seek a future outside the UK. In the past year opinion polls have shifted from a small majority backing the union – broadly the pattern since a referendum rejecting independence in 2014 – to a small majority backing departure. Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's first minister and leader of the Scottish National Party, has done it determinedly, by exploiting Scots' dislike of the Brexit settlement. The ills<sup>2</sup> of fishermen unable to sell their catches are blamed on Westminster. Polls suggest that, in the Scottish elections in May, the SNP will gain an overall majority in a system designed to avoid it. Arlene Foster, first minister of Northern Ireland and

1. Untied: détaché.
2. Ills: dommages, maux.



head of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), has done it stupidly, by rejecting the softer Brexit proposed by Theresa May, Mr Johnson's predecessor. That would have avoided the vexed issue<sup>1</sup> of how and where to create a border with the EU. Neither Brussels, nor Dublin nor London was prepared to create a hard border on the island of Ireland, so Mr Johnson created one instead in the Irish Sea, between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, weakening the union which the DUP exists to defend. That helps explain a week of rioting earlier this month. Resentments fester<sup>2</sup> and, as the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Irish independence nears, reunification has never looked closer.

If the Scots, Northern Irish or even the Welsh choose to go their own way, they should be allowed to do so – but only once it is clearly their settled will. That is by no means the case yet, and this newspaper hopes it never will be.

Breaking up a country should never be done lightly, because it is a painful process – politically, economically and emotionally. The fact that the survival of the union is now in Mr Johnson's unreliable<sup>3</sup> hands will bring no comfort to anybody who hopes it has a future. Yet he is concerned enough to have created a “union unit” within Downing Street, and put it under Michael Gove, one of his cleverest colleagues and the government's only high-profile non-English minister. Some of what Mr Johnson is doing is sensible. He is right to insist that now is not the time for another Scottish referendum. The last one, only seven years ago, was advertised as a once-in-a-generation opportunity. It is true that Britain's circumstances have since changed, but Brexit is very recent, and opinion about it has not had a chance to settle. There should not be another referendum until polls show a clear and sustained majority for independence. Holding frequent referendums is a recipe for instability and an eventual end to the union: at some point the trigger and the bullet will coincide.

Mr Johnson was elected prime minister to “get Brexit done”. In carrying that out, he has endangered his country's integrity. His single most important task for the rest of his term in office is to hold the union together. If he fails, he will go down in history not as the man who freed the United Kingdom, but as the man who destroyed it.

1. Vexed issue: question qui fâche, question controversée.
2. resentments fester: la rancune couve.
3. Unreliable: peu fiable.